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Beyond the Monastic Walls: An Analysis of Pedagogical Methods, Curricular Diversity, and Socio-Political Influence in Ancient Nalanda's Educational System

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Abstract

This paper presents an analytical review of the educational ecosystem of ancient Nalanda Mahavihara, presenting a case for its reconsideration as a proto-university and dynamic nexus of global intellectual exchange. Going beyond the monastic walls, the report analyzes its unique pedagogical model, based on dialectical reasoning and intellectual meritocracy, and a remarkably diverse curriculum that went beyond religious dogma. It further explores Nalanda's role as a cultural diplomacy hub, powered by a multi-national network of patronage. Another component is the nuanced, multi-causal analysis of its decline—a contestation of a simplistic narrative about a single destructive event and a systemic collapse due to a conjunction of political, economic, and internal religious factors. Synthesizing Chinese and Tibetan pilgrims' accounts with findings from epigraphy and

archaeology, this analysis will aim to outline Nalanda's legacy as an unparalleled model for intellectual freedom, interdisciplinary learning, and international cooperation.

Key Words

Monastic Walls, Pedagogical, Diversity, Socio-Political.

Introduction: A Global Hub of Learning

The old seat of learning at Nalanda, which existed in present-day Bihar, India, bears witness to the intellectual and cultural pinnacle of that time. Nalanda thrived for over 800 years from approximately the fifth century CE to the twelfth century CE and was more than simply a Buddhist monastery; it was a “famous Mahavihara,” a large residential institution which drew students and scholars from all over Asia. Its time of prominence, corresponding with the Gupta and Pala empires, is called the “Golden Age of India.” While the term “university” - as we understand it today - has become a contested term among scholars with respect to Nalanda, there can be little disagreement that it was an advanced and complex institution of higher learning, unprecedented in both size and scope. Current scholarly understanding of the operations of Nalanda is heavily reliant on the rich travel accounts of foreign pilgrims who came to India in order to study.

The most important of these accounts are those of the 7th century CE Chinese pilgrims Xuanzang and Yijing, who provided us with a rich depiction of the daily life, intellectual culture, and administrative structure at Nalanda. These writings, when considered alongside archeological and epigraphic evidence, offer the basis for a comprehensive and thorough analysis of the institution. Consequently, this scholarship employs a critical methodology to bring together these various sources to reconstruct the intricate systems that managed Nalanda's intellectual and social environment. The summation here is that the intellectual primacy of Nalanda was a result of an overwhelmingly advanced, interconnected system. That system consisted of three interrelated components: a pedagogical philosophy based on meritocracy and values dialectic thought and critical discourse; a rigorous, pluralistic curriculum without parallel in spanning inter-religious traditions; and a dynamic socio-political apparatus of patronage and cultural diplomacy, which positioned Nalanda as an indispensable hub of international relations.

Through an exploration of these three pillars, this report aims to provide a multi-dimensional understanding of the profound and enduring impact of Nalanda. The Pedagogical Revolution: A System of Discipline and Dialectics The pedagogical system at Nalanda was not a disorganized assortment of customs but an consciously designed machinery that nurtured intellectual and spiritual merit. It was a transition from the less systematized modes of learning that existed before it, providing a formalized structure for learning. It had a definite philosophy behind it, an enrollment procedure that was strict and select, and a focus on a certain style of intellectual pursuit.¹

Fundamentally, at its roots, education at Nalanda had a radically different purpose from the instrumental approach commonly found in contemporary systems, which view learning as a vehicle for professional or economic success.

Nalanda's educational framework was premised on a more exalted purpose. Namely, the attainment of spiritual liberation, or moksha, bodhi, and dharma through the attainment of knowledge. The curriculum aimed to develop the person in all dimensions socially, politically and morally, as well as in intellect, the latter being ultimately a means toward self-realization and social reform, as was its teaching missions. This comprehensive education model was characterized by a coherent blend of intellectual seriousness and spiritual discipline. The thirst for enlightenment was not incidental to, nor simply qualification of, an academic pursuit; it was the culmination of the intellectual enterprise that endowed it significance. The pursuit of this goal included moral and ethical education, and had a strong sense of purpose intertwined in daily life.

Monastic discipline, or meditation, and skills toward developing the virtues of compassion, self-discipline, and humility were equated as being as important as scholarly merit. This unique combination of motivating individuals toward a higher spiritual goal combined with a practical, critical curriculum was part of the main approach toward the esteem which drew scholars to Nalanda. It also accounts for the ability of the college to attract individuals for employment, educators and students alike, whom sought out a place to study, intellectually and morally, regardless of academic credentials, which helped contribute to the reputation of producing superior thinkers. The commitment to academic rigor started at the gate of Nalanda. The school was famous for its meritocratic and rigorous admission process, which Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang recorded with much pride. To gain an admission, potential scholars would have to take an oral exam administered by a learned monk, colloquially called a "gatekeeper". This intellectual sieve was designed to test the knowledge and intellectual depth of potential students, which resulted in many students being rejected.

The challenge involved in this exam ensured that only the best prepared, and most committed students gained admission. The meritocratic, institutionalized nature of the selection process was an innovation distinct from a less formal education milieu. By establishing an academic filter immediately at the point of entry, the institution ensured that the same high caliber of students would matriculate. An interesting aspect of this meritocracy was that there were no tuition fees once you were admitted, and students lived in free housing. This aspect to the meritocracy eliminated barriers to attendance, which meant that students from any economic or class background could attend, creating an avenue for unfiltered talent to amplify..²

This novel form of support freed both students and faculty from having to pursue outside jobs, and it was one of the earliest, and impactful examples of a fund-driven model that allowed action-oriented, continuous research and study. Centered in the beautification of vâd-vivâd, or philosophical debate, Nalanda's academic philosophy was not interpreted as informal discussions of opinions among peers. Rather, vâd-vivâd was utilized as a strict opting, dialectical process that characterized a central position of academy practice and intellectual legitimization. Students were taught to question, refute, and refine ideas through authoritative defense. In this process, student's not only rationalized ideas but also cultivated intellectual humility and critical thinking. The object was not the particular matter of whose thoughts prevailed, but rather broadening the vision for thinking, to unsettle assumptions, and to realize more deeply some concept of abstract thinking. There were not systems of publishing and peer-review today. Thus, the debater model was a key process for the authorizing of knowledge claim and practice of scholarly epistemology. The system permit and provided the space for scholars to argue and validate knowledge in a formal correctional intellectual process. In practice, the argument was always tested, questioned, and subjected to doubt to validate claims to knowledge.

By requiring scholars to present their ideas and then present them to the rigorous scrutiny of their peers, it ensured that the most well-supported and defensible theories would triumph. In this shared process of inquiry, knowledge was animated by "merit, mutual interaction," and a shared heritage, creating a truly progressive intellectual tradition. Xuanzang's travelogue evokes this spirit of scholarship, reporting that "from dawn till dusk they discuss," with lectures being held each day in "a hundred separate halls." Nalanda thrived from its residential-based system, enabling ease of access to an integrated and holistic learning and living experience. The daily regime of the students and monks was highly ritualized, the purpose being to maximize the time available for study and reflection.

This involved a series of rituals and rites, which included taking daily baths in the campus pools and attending recitations of scriptures in the morning and early evening. The daily atmosphere was one of seriousness and dignity: monks read, conversed, and discussed with every moment filled with productivity. Institutional support was all encompassing.³

This historical degree of institutional provision was among the main reasons that promoted the intensive research and intellectual production for which the university came to be famous.

Curricular Pluralism: Beyond the Buddhist Canon

Nalanda's status as an intellectual center for the world was not due to specialization within one specific area of study but on its adoption of a wide, multi-disciplinary course of study. Such curricular pluralism was a deliberate decision that went a long way towards its excellence and global popularity and rendered it a "cultural melting pot" of thought.

Buddhist studies, being a Mahavihara, inevitably constituted the foundation of Nalanda's curriculum. The university was one of the chief institutions for the study of Mahayana Buddhism, but it also provided teaching in the Hinayana sect. Tibetan tradition is that the university instructed four major doxographies: Sarvastivada Vaibhashika, Sarvastivada Sautrantika, the Mahayana philosophy Madhyamaka, and the Mahayana philosophy Cittamatra. The teachers were some of Mahayana Buddhism's most highly respected scholars, including Nagarjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu, and Dharmakirti, who wrote hundreds of texts that influenced the intellectual and spiritual contours of Asia.

The most impressive feature of Nalanda's curriculum was its acceptance of secular studies, which showed a conscious effort to be a universal center for learning, rather than a sectarian seminary.

The curriculum was truly a pluralistic one; it included schools of thought outside the Buddhist canon, such as Hinduism, Jainism and Sankhya. Students were expected to learn from classical texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Proficiency in Sanskrit was even considered necessary in

order to learn ancient wisdom. Apart from literature and philosophy, the university also taught an advanced form of medicine (Ayurveda), in which herbal medicines, surgical procedures and diagnostic approaches were studied. Mathematics (Ganita) and astronomy (Jyotisha) were subjects that were also taught with esteem.

Aryabhata, the great mathematician and astronomer, who was the first person to claim the Earth is spherical and rotates on its axis, is said to have studied and taught at Nalanda, which supports the institution's emphasis on scientific inquiry. The presence of such secular subjects allowed Nalanda to be known as a "great magnet" for scholars from all intellectual traditions, which allowed it to be an internationally oriented institution despite being a monastic institution. The range of topics offered by Nalanda was a purposeful decision that directly contributed to its intellectual stature and high universal value. Multiple languages were not only nice to know, but a requirement to master at Nalanda. Multilingualism for example, with students studying Pali, Prakrit, Persian, and Tibetan—was successively cultivated especially for, scholarly pursuits and intercultural communication. Being multilingual was a valuable component of knowledge systems that allowed scholars to bring teachings home and make them accessible to their communities, as was the case with Kumarajiva when he brought major Buddhist texts into Chinese.⁴

Nalanda also encouraged an interdisciplinary approach whereby a scholar was a scholar not merely because of the depth of their expertise in one field but rather based upon their erudition across "various and multiple disciplines." Such facile transfer of ideas guaranteed that philosophers could talk about ideas with a mathematician, and doctors had debates with astronomers. This academic atmosphere facilitated by a vast library that held "hundreds of thousands of volumes," and which was the main source of the textual flow which went to East Asia. The cross-pollination of ideas produced conceptual breakthroughs while establishing Nalanda as a cosmopolitan center of knowledge production and transmission.

The Sociopolitical Ecosystem: Patronage, Power, and Diplomacy Nalanda's thought and academic success was inextricably linked to its external world. It flourished within a high-level sociopolitical system far removed from the kingdom itself. It was buoyed by a sophisticated patronage network, and by its instrumental place of the university as a center of cultural diplomacy. Nalanda's success was based upon the benevolence of its patrons. The monastery was established by the generous sponsorship of Gupta Emperor Kumaragupta I in 427 CE, which was to remain supported by his heirs. Other great kings also sponsored the monastery with powerful financial means, most importantly Emperor Harsha in the seventh century, who provided the university with a source of income generated from 100 villages that sprang from a steady and self-replicating source of funding. The later Pala dynasty kings, such as Devapala, were also generous friends of the university, building on new complexes in addition to restoring complexes. This friend network did not exclusively set boundaries of being Indian.⁵

Epigraphic evidence, such as the Nalanda inscription of Devapaladeva, indicates that the university attracted international sponsorship, all the way from as far away as Suvarnavdipa (modern-day Indonesia). The inscription records a request by Balaputra, the king of Suvarnavdipa, to Pala King Devapala for a grant of five villages for the upkeep of a monastery that housed monks from his kingdom. This evidences that Nalanda had highly evolved funding model that involved decentralized endowments. The university's prominence invited sponsorship from the international community, which lent financial credibility to the university's reputation, thus establishing an attractively powerful self-sustaining loop of intellectual and economic power. Nalanda was not just an institution of learning, however; it served as an effective tool of cultural diplomacy on behalf of its benefactors.

As a leading 'institution without borders', Nalanda attracted scholars from all around the world, and one of the best instances of this in action is the pilgrimage of Xuanzang to Bihar. While his pilgrimage to India was primarily an academic pilgrimage, it also served as "official exchanges" between King Harshavardhana and the Tang court, and eventually opened a path to diplomatic exchanges between the two kingdoms. The king from Suvarnavdipa's ambassadorial request also exemplifies this role. The foreign monarch was engaging

in observable religiosity by gifting a monastery to Nalanda, as he was simultaneously forging a direct political and cultural relationship with the ruling power of the Pala dynasty. Nalanda was, therefore, an important nexus of political behavior in ancient Asian statecraft.

The university's intellectual prestige was a form of soft power its founders exploited to foster political relationships, perhaps enhance their own reputations, and increase regional and perhaps more broadly international peace. Nalanda's foremost legacy was not its materiality, but the eventual dissemination of the knowledge it developed and augmented. Nalanda was the lead vessel and transmittal center for the intellectual traditions, especially Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, by spreading those traditions into Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. Those scholars, who studied in Nalanda, brought the learning they learned, to their home stations, and the impact was felt into the intellectual and philosophical dark ages of entire civilizations. Good examples of this include knowledge categories that formed Tibetan script and grammar, and scholars such as Kumarajiva, who translated massive amounts of Sanskrit texts into Chinese, thus allowing a wider audience access to the book of Sanskrit texts of Eastern thought. The physical obliteration of the university was a loss to India's intellectual heritage, but the knowledge and ideas had already "travelled to other parts of Asia," so that the university's deep influence became irreversible and geographical location transcendental.⁶

The Decline of a Titan: A Multicausal Analysis

The decline of the golden age of Nalanda is a multidimensional and hotly-contested topic. Although the conventional account cites one event, a cumulative study shows that its fall was the result of a combination of forces both from within and outside, which had been working for centuries. The best-established explanation holds the destruction of Nalanda to be caused by a Turkish attack under Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in the late twelfth century CE. The account goes that the university's huge library was burnt and that it smoldered for months, and that numerous monks were killed, a turning point in the decline of Buddhism in India. However, this traditional account is complicated by other historical evidence. The Tibetan monk Dharmasvamin, who visited Nalanda in the 1230s—decades after the supposed final destruction—found the university still functioning, albeit in a state of ruin with a community of about 70 monks. Alternative Tibetan accounts, including that of the historian Taranatha, also imply that sectarian Hindus following the Tantric tradition had participated in the burning of Buddhist monasteries out of jealousy for their faith. This contradicting evidence indicates that the destruction was not a one-time, flash-in-the-pan event but rather an extended process of decline and decay.

The Bakhtiyar Khalji raid was a severe blow, one probably the last, but it did not immediately put an end to the institution; instead, it was the last, mortal blow to an already advanced process of decay. The downfall of Nalanda was a systemic failure that was fueled by a feedback cycle of several reinforcing factors. The prosperity of the university had been established on a patronage base, and once the base eroded, the whole environment started to disintegrate.⁷

- **External Factors:** One key external factor was the continuous erosion of royal patronage after the Pala dynasty weakened. The financial bases of the university were undermined, causing economic instability that impeded sustaining its operation and all-around support mechanism. There was also political instability as well as repeated invasions in the Magadha region, which had an impact on local trade routes and impeded the economic support to the university. The Huns' and Gaudas' centuries-long earlier raids had already induced serious damage. The dependence on a central, physical establishment left Nalanda open to such successive attacks, as seen from the fact that other, more decentralized faiths such as Hinduism and Jainism were able to withstand similar pressures.
- **Internal Factors:** Internally within the Buddhist community itself, the emergence of sectarianism created divisions and tensions within the university, disintegrating its internal cohesion and "teaching ecosystem." Nalanda was also confronted with direct competition from nascent centers of learning, specifically Vikramshila, which was nurtured by the Pala monarchs and focused on topics such as Tantrism. The

destruction of Nalanda's massive library, whether by an individual marauder or successive pillaging by various religious groups, was a devastating loss of institutional memory and a serious setback to its intellectual reputation. The drop in student enrollment, inspired by fear and insecurity through invasions, further accelerated the loss of cultural prestige. This loss, in turn, legitimized the further withholding of royal and popular patronage. The last invasion by Bakhtiyar Khalji was therefore not the only reason but the culmination of decades of systemic decay.

Conclusion: A Lasting Legacy for the Modern World

The analysis in this report substantiates the assertion that Nalanda Mahavihara operated as more than an ordinary monastic institution. It represented a highly-tiered, complicated proto-university fueled by a distinct blend of a merit-based pedagogy, an array of curriculum, and a developed socio-political network leveraging patronage and diplomatic etiquette. Its rigorous admissions process ensured that the students attained the highest caliber of intellectual ability, and its vâd-vivâd system provided an environment of critical inquiry that served as a proto-peer-review system. The curriculum provided a breadth of offerings permitting a considerable diversity of secular topics as well as Buddhist studies courses, which contributed to their standing as a true "cultural melting pot" and more, an intellectual center of scholars with varying intellectual traditions. Coupled with the status of the institution in culture diplomacy, Nalanda was a true accelerant of intellect and political transmission in ancient Asia.

Support from local and international patrons created an intricate system that could sustain the institution and engage in the production and dissemination of knowledge throughout the world. Nalanda's legacy extends beyond the grand ruins of the site to the philosophies, writings and even lineages of scholars that it produced and disseminated across the continent. The loss of its physical nature was a tragedy for India's intellectual legacy, but the ideas that emanated from Nalanda had already been woven into other forms of global knowledge and thus secured their survival. Today, ideals and values of Nalanda continue to reverberate through contemporary academic systems and institutions. The recently revived Nalanda University- supported by a consortium of East Asian nations- aims to possess the same "ideals and standards of the ancient seat of learning," that represent a value for open inquiry and scholarship, as well education for the purpose of peacebuilding. The history of Nalanda in ancient times represents as much a lasting legacy of the flourishing of thought that embraces intellectual independence, transdisciplinary inquiry, and global co-operation has had on the growth and development of civilization.

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